

■ Rural Population

Today, the United States is primarily metropolitan. People who live in large cities and their suburbs account for 80 percent of the total population. Nonmetropolitan people outside large cities and suburban counties numbered about 53.9 million in 1996.

Although nonmetro population increased in both the 1970's and 1980's, its proportion of the total population fell slightly because the metro population grew even more rapidly.

After 1970, most nonmetro counties that were losing population in the 1960's began to grow again because of job development, commuting, or the development of retirement communities that drew retirees in from other areas. However, after 1980, low farm income conditions and a slump in mining and manufacturing employment led to a slow but widespread decline in rural population. From 1980 to 1990, about half of all nonmetro counties decreased in population, generally in the same areas that declined before 1970. Some nonmetro counties, though, grew enough as retirement or recreation areas, or from commuting to metro jobs, to produce overall nonmetro population growth during the decade.

Since 1990, there is evidence once again of increased retention of people in rural areas. From 1990 to 1996, the population of nonmetro counties grew at an annual pace more than double that of the 1980's, with far fewer counties declining. This change has affected all types of counties and most regions of the country. Improvement in rural economic conditions is thought to be generally responsible for this change. But, recreation and retirement counties continue to be the most rapidly developing group. Declining population is still characteristic of areas that are dependent on farming, three-fourths of which have continued to have more people moving out than in.